

The Seven Deadly Principles

by Richard Mitchell

After sober and judicious consideration, and weighing one thing against another in the interests of reasonable compromise, H. L. Mencken concluded that a startling and dramatic improvement in American education required only that we hang all the professors and burn down the schools. His uncharacteristically moderate proposal was not adopted. Those who actually knew more about education than Mencken did could see that his plan was nothing more than cosmetic and would in fact provide only an outward appearance of improvement. Those who knew less, on the other hand, had somewhat more elaborate plans of their own, and they just happened to be in charge of the schools.

Those who knew less, to be specific, were the members of the National Education Association's Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, a.k.a. The Gang of Twenty-seven, now long forgotten but certainly not gone. They builded better than they knew, and their souls go marching on in every school in America today. The Commission was established in 1913, the year that also brought us the income tax. Many of its members were functionaries of school bureaucracies, from the United States Commissioner of Education himself down through supervisors and associate superintendents and principals and even a high school inspector, whatever that was, to no less a personage than a senior educational secretary of the YMCA. Professors and assistant professors of education represented the higher learning. One of *them* was chairman of the committee on mathematics, naturally, while the committees on lesser disciplines, notably classical and modern languages, were directed by high school teachers. The stern sciences were served by a professor of education, while the smiling sciences like social studies and the other household arts were overseen by federal bureaucrats. In the whole motley crew there were no scientists, no mathematicians, no historians, no traditional scholars of any sort.

That was surely no accident, for it seems to have been an article of the Commission's unspoken agenda to overturn the work of an earlier NEA task force that *had* been made up largely of scholars, the Committee of Ten, called together in 1892 and chaired by Charles W. Eliot, then president of Harvard University. That committee had come out in favor of traditional academic study in the public schools, which they fancied should be devoted to the pursuit of knowledge and the training of the intellect. But what can you expect from a bunch of intellectuals? The Eliot Report of 1893 was given to things like this:

As studies in language and in the natural sciences are best adapted to cultivate the habits of observation; as mathematics are the traditional training of the reasoning faculties; so history and its allied branches are better adapted than any other studies to promote the invaluable mental power which we call judgment.

Obviously, the Eliot committee did its work in the lost, dark days before the world of education had discovered the power of the bold innovative thrust. All they asked of the high schools was the pursuit of knowledge and the exercise of the mind in the cause of judgment.

The Gang of Twenty-seven, unhampered by intellectual predispositions, found that proposal an elitist's dream. They concluded, in other words, that precious few schoolchildren were capable of the pursuit of knowledge and the exercise of the mind in the cause of judgment. That, of course, turned out to be the most momentous self-fulfilling prophecy of our century. It is also a splendid example of the muddled thought out of which established educational practice derives its theories. The proposals of the Eliot report are deemed elitist because they presume that most schoolchildren are generally capable of the mastery of subject matter and intellectual skill; the proposals of the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, on the other hand, are "democratic" in presuming that most schoolchildren are *not* capable of such things and should stick to homemaking and the manual arts.

This bizarre principle is still very much with us as a generator of educationistic theory and practice. It shows, among other things, the immense power of words, especially nasty ones like "elitism," notably abhorrent to our egalitarian society. It is certainly true (and puzzling as well, since the men who made us this egalitarian society were indubitable intellectuals) that we distrust intellectuals. They *do* seem to be an elite, although, thank goodness, a powerless elite. They butter little bread. Nevertheless, when we ask those intellectuals what we should do in the schools, they tell us to do everything we can to bring forth swarms of other intellectuals, which must lead us to conclude that the intellectual elitists can't be too smart. What kind of an elitist can it be who wants to generate his own competitors, and lots of them at that? But the champions of a "democratic" public education, righteous enemies of elitism, rejoice in the profitable belief that hardly any of the children in their charge can expect to rise to the level of curriculum facilitator, to say nothing of superintendent of schools.

In the cause of "democratic" public education, the Gang of Twenty-seven compounded illogic with ignorance by deciding that the education proposed by the Eliot committee was primarily meant as "preparation for the college or university." True, relatively few high school graduates of 1913 went on to college; but even fewer had done so in 1893. Indeed, it was just *because* so few would go on to more education that the Eliot committee wanted so many to have so much in high school. But the Gang of Twenty-seven decided that since very few students would go on to the mastery of a discipline and the rigorous training of the mind in college, which colleges were still fancied to provide in those days, there was little need to fuss about such things in high school. They had far more interesting things to fuss about in any case, *their* kinds of things. They enshrined them all, where they abide as holy relics of the cult of educationism to this day, in their final report, issued in 1918 (and printed at government expense, like all the outpourings of educationism ever since) as *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*.

Cardinal Principles was a small pamphlet, not much larger than *The Communist Manifesto* or a man's hand. It rejected the elitist and undemocratic education of the dark past and provided in its place "preparation for effective living." It made us the effective livers we are today, and it

sends forth every year from our public schools and colleges all those effective livers who will make the future of the nation.

The seven cardinal principles were put forth as the paths to the seven "main objectives of education," which had finally been discovered once and for all after twenty-five hundred years of intellectual floundering. The first of those main objectives was *Health. Health.* Its primacy is justified by that firm grasp on the obvious that was to become the very foundation stone of educational theorizing: "Health needs cannot be neglected during the period of secondary education without serious danger to the individual and the race." How true. You can't make effective livers out of dead children. And think of the race! Suppose they *all* die! How then will we get the taxpayers "to secure teachers competent to ascertain and meet the needs of individual pupils and able to inculcate in the entire student body a love for clean sport?"

(It is interesting to notice that, like this one, all of the proposals in *Cardinal Principles* will call for vastly increased faculties and administrative bureaucracies both in the high schools and in the teachers' colleges. This has since become the Eighth Cardinal Principle, which you can see doing its work in your local school system whenever any remedy to any problem or shortcoming is proposed: Whatever we do will require more money, more teachers, more administrators, and more mandated courses in education.)

Cardinal Principles even proposed that there be in each school a kind of health officer, whose job would range from looking around for insanitary conditions in the building to inquiring into the social lives of the students, who might well be risking their health in the streets and in ice-cream parlors. It was in the cause of health, I believe, that my own first-grade teacher used to hold fingernail inspection every morning and cry out now and then to some slouching young reprobate: "Posture!" It was in this cause, too, that what was called "physical education" became the oppressive monster that it is today and, by the very power of its name, compounded beyond remedy the educationistic delusion that "education" and "training" are the same thing. It is not a coincidence, nor is it without large consequences, that so many of America's high school principals were once phys. ed. teachers.

The second "main objective" is, at first, slightly surprising: *Command of Fundamental Processes*. In 1918 that meant just about what Basic Minimum Competence means today. Although it certainly did not mean anything *more* than Basic Minimum Competence either, it did at least mean a higher minimum. Nowadays we count ourselves lucky if the students can read and write at the ninth-grade level, whatever that means this year. *Cardinal Principles* says that such a level of competence, even in 1918, "is not sufficient for the needs of modern life." (I must say, too, that *Cardinal Principles*, although stilted and dull, is not written in the self-serving, mindless jargon of today's educationists. This credit, however, must be balanced against a large debit. It was in the ensuing scramble of silly, pseudo-scholarship required for the justification of the cardinal principles that our educationists discovered the power of mendacious gobbledygook and adopted it as their native tongue.)

Furthermore, it is clear that, while the drafters of *Cardinal Principles* do put Command of Fundamental Processes second only to Health, they do so apparently as an involuntary bend of the knee to that discredited old elitism. About the other "main objectives" they have a lot to say, and many suggestions as to how curriculum might be manipulated in their

accommodation and many new people hired in their cause. When they have called for Command of Fundamental Processes, that's it. They proceed at once to *Worthy Home-membership*, a main objective much more to their liking.

Cardinal Principles admits, affirms, in fact, that "In the education of every high-school girl, the household arts should have a prominent place because of their importance to the girl herself and to others whose welfare will be directly in her keeping." It presumes, too, that even girls who do idle away a few more years in college or in "occupations not related to the household arts" will someday have to face their "actual needs and future responsibilities" and "understand the essentials of food values, of sanitation, and of household budgets."

Although *Worthy Home-membership* obviously has a lot to do with cooking and sewing, it also provides for the dilution of whatever may persist of the old elitist curriculum:

The social studies should deal with the home as a fundamental social institution and clarify its relation to the wider interests outside. [That will disqualify history, a discipline notably unconcerned with "the home," as a worthy study.] Literature should interpret and idealize the human elements that go to make the home. [That knocks out the study of literature, which is remarkably unlikely to do what some educationists decree that it "should" do.] Music and art should result in more beautiful homes and greater joy therein. [They really had to stretch for that one, but it will call to order pretentious art and music teachers who peddle their subjects as intrinsically worthwhile, and it will even justify the inclusion of interior decorating in the high school curriculum.]

It is exactly that, the dilution of ordinary academic study, that makes this kind of "education" so pernicious. Obviously no one can object to housekeeping skills or to beautiful homes and joy therein. But beauty and joy, and even housekeeping skills, are either diminished or destroyed by ignorance and stupidity, which are likely to flourish in a place where history is subordinated to a "social study" of the home as an institution and where literature is chosen for study if it does what it "should" do.

Those funny "educations" are all the more powerful and long-lived because they are designed to grow fat and sassy through eating the bodies of their victims. When we embark on an ambitious program of *Worthy Home-membership Education*, we justify ourselves by naming some indubitable benefits we intend to bestow: an understanding of "the essentials of food values, of sanitation, and of household budgets," for instance. Those benefits, of course, can be had, along with a great deal more, by those who study and learn such things as biology, chemistry, and mathematics, but those stern old disciplines offer little scope for the bold, innovative thrust and the increased budget. So we pretend, or some of us may actually believe, that home budgeting, which is a skill all these girls need, can be learned in the *absence* of mathematics, which is an elitist skill useful only for a few.

And sure enough--little by little the study and practice of such subjects as science and mathematics decline, and fewer and fewer students take such courses. We have helped this decline by providing easy and "democratic" options for those who seem to have a little trouble

with the demanding elitism of traditional academic study. Now the day has come when very few high school girls can do any arithmetic at all. Now is our triumph. We can redignify Worthy Home-membership Education with a trendy new name, Consumer Education, and teach nutrition and wary shopping to girls who are innocent of science and unable to figure out the price of an ounce of macaroni. Those deficits, which flow from our very existence, we can now put forth as arguments for our continued existence. This pattern, of course, can describe the growth and triumph of any of those "educations."

Another such education was the fourth main objective in *Cardinal Principles: Vocation*. The Commission's proposals for a vocational education program that would take up "much of the pupil's time" derive from its own cardinal principles: that few students can do academic work and would best spend their time in learning homemaking skills and trades, and that the larger purpose of public education was to bring about a certain social order. They urge vocational education not only to "equip the individual to secure a livelihood for himself and those dependent on him," but also so that he may "maintain the right relationships toward his fellow workers and society." The Commission does not, of course, explain what "right relationships" might be, perhaps presuming that all the other educationists who read their report would surely favor right relationships over wrong relationships without giving the matter any thought. As usual.

But vocational education, as imagined in *Cardinal Principles*, was not to be a separate program within the schools; it was intended that even those students who did not spend "much of their time" in the wood shop would nevertheless "develop an appreciation of the significance" of vocations "and a clear conception of right relations [there they are again] between the members of the chosen vocation, between different vocational groups, between employer and employee, and between producer and consumer." All such things can be studied, of course, in the context of several well-known disciplines, but study can provide only knowledge. *Cardinal Principles* does not call for *knowledge* of these matters, however, but for "appreciation" and a "clear conception of right relations."

It is a thematic illusion of our educational enterprise that understanding can be had without knowledge, that the discretion can be informed without information, that judgment need not wait on evidence. Before we can ask what are the right relations between producer and consumer, for instance, we must know what are all the *possible* relations between producer and consumer. We must know antecedents and consequences; we must know functions and contexts. We must, in fact, know more than we can hope to know, which is why thoughtful people only reluctantly and armed with as much knowledge as possible leap from knowing into judging and decide to "hold" some truths self-evident.

On the other hand, *Cardinal Principles*, in speaking of its fifth main objective, *Civics Education*, leaps blithely into: "Too frequently, however, does mere information, conventional in value and remote in its bearing, make up the content of the social studies." Mere information. What the Commission might mean by "conventional in value" I just don't know, but I do know, along with all who have ever studied, that only a fool is willing to take the risk that this or that bit of mere information is "remote in its bearing." Facts seem unrelated only to those who know few facts.

As you might expect, Civics Education--what a noble cause!--is given enormous power to alter and dilute the content of traditional academic subjects:

History should so treat the growth of institutions that their present value may be appreciated. Geography should show the interdependence of men while it shows their common dependence on nature. Civics should concern itself less with constitutional questions and remote governmental functions, and should direct attention to social agencies close at hand and to the informal activities of daily life that regard and seek the common good. Such agencies as child-welfare organizations and consumers' leagues afford specific opportunities for the expression of civic qualities by the older pupils.

The work in English should kindle social ideals and give insight into social conditions and into personal character as related to these conditions. Hence the emphasis by the committee on English on the importance of a knowledge of social activities, social movements, and social needs on the part of the teacher of English.

And, not content with prescribing an "appreciation" of institutions that would satisfy Lenin, ignorance of the constitution in the name of responsible citizenship, and literature as an instigator of social compliance, the Commission decides also that "*all* subjects should contribute to good citizenship." (My italics.) While they would probably not suggest, in that cause, that the binomial theorem be put to a vote in class, their descendants and adherents *will*, in fact, suggest that mathematics, obviously "remote in its bearing" on good citizenship, is not really at the heart of the educational enterprise.

While its concrete proposals for Civics Education are very much like its proposals for all the other educations, *Cardinal Principles*, in the name of "attitudes and habits important in a democracy," goes an extra step and prescribes what should actually happen in the classroom. It urges "the assignment of projects and problems to groups of pupils for cooperative solution and the socialized recitation whereby the class as a whole develops a sense of collective responsibility. Both of these devices give training in collective thinking." Here we can see the theoretical foundations of the rap session, the encounter group, the values clarification module, and the typical course in education, but also something far worse.

For thousands of years, many decent, knowing, and thoughtful people have hated and feared democracy, and with good reasons. We don't think of it that way any longer, probably because we have all been to schools devoted to the cardinal principles, but the framers of our society took great pains to guard us against the obvious (to them) dangers inherent in majority rule. It was precisely to commend and elucidate the constitution's ability to protect the few from the ignorance or self-interest of the many that Madison wrote the tenth Federalist Paper; which is, of course, not included in the Civics Education curriculum. The children who are to generate "cooperative solutions" and "socialized recitations" are to do so without concern for, or even any knowledge of, "constitutional questions and remote governmental functions" like checks and balances. They will do their "collective thinking" unencumbered by "mere information."

It is another of the educationists' self-serving delusions that if enough of the ignorant pool their resources, knowledge will appear, and that a parliament of fools can deliberate its way to wisdom. This delusion is not entirely groundless. It is grounded in another delusion, the one that flows from a half-baked adaptation of the work of Wundt.

You will recall Cattell's curious conclusion that learning the sounds of letters was not useful in learning to read because those who could read did not sound out the letters. Recall also that Wundt saw *learning* (he did *not* say "education") as a conditioned response to stimuli. For American educationists, such "facts" were absorbed into a generalized notion that might be put something like this: We notice that educated people, whatever that might mean, have certain attributes and that they do things in certain ways, or, since we are educationists, that they "exhibit certain behaviors." So, if our students come to have those attributes and exhibit those behaviors, they will be educated, and we will be educators.

Educated and thoughtful people have indeed often met and deliberated together and solved problems and found wisdom. Just look at the Constitutional Convention, for example, or, if you're a little short on mere information, consider the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education. Therefore, if we assign projects and problems to groups of students we will instill in them the same "sense of collective responsibility" that we see so often among the educated and thoughtful. In that fashion, furthermore, we will engender in them an appropriate appreciation of "the ideals of American democracy and loyalty to them," as *Cardinal Principles* recommends.

An analogous line of reasoning would begin with the observation that musicians have been known to play "Lady of Spain" and end with the determination to train seals to play "Lady of Spain" on bicycle horns and turn them into musicians.

And there is another ominous and far-reaching implication in the Commission's assignment of projects and problems hidden, not very deeply, in "collective thinking." This phrase reveals an appalling ignorance and thoughtlessness out of which terrifying educationistic malfeasances have been growing for decades.

Schooling is done in public places, but the roots of an education can grow only in the hidden ground of the mind. Lessons are taught in social institutions, but they can be learned only by private people. The acts that are at once the means and the ends of education, knowing, thinking, understanding, judging, are all committed in solitude. It is only in *a* mind that the work of the mind can be done. There is no such thing as "collective thinking." Our schools can be an instrument for socialization or an incentive to thoughtfulness, but they cannot be both.

Thus it is, for instance, that such elementary skills as reading and writing, public analogues of private thinking, are so ill taught in the schools. It is not sufficient explanation of this failure to point out that the educationists who design the schools are themselves notoriously poor readers and writers, although they are. That leads us only to ask in turn why *that* should be so. At the root of our widespread and institutionalized illiteracy is a fevered commitment to socialization and an equally unhealthy hostility to the solitary, and thus probably antisocial, work of the mind. In school, the inane and uninformed regurgitations of the ninth-grade rap session on solar energy as a viable alternative to nuclear power are positive, creative, self-

esteem-enhancing student behavioral outcomes; the child who sits alone at the turning of the staircase, reading, is a weirdo. The students did not bring that "appreciation" to school; they learned it there.

Somewhat later in their history, the educationists will justify and formalize their hostility to the intellect, with which they never *did* feel comfortable, by inventing the "affective domain" of feelings and attitudes and appreciations and setting its gracious virtues over against the tedious and unimaginative "rote" learning of the merely "cognitive domain." But they will only raise walls where the Gang of Twenty-seven has dug the foundation. We can see the marks of their shovels in all those appreciations and attitudes and values and "worthy" attributes of this and that. And when they come to their sixth main objective of secondary education, *Worthy Use of Leisure*, they outdo their successors in a sublime presumptuousness possible only to the happily and profoundly ignorant.

As to the Worthy Use of Leisure, they counsel thus:

Heretofore the high school has given little conscious attention to this objective. It has so exclusively sought intellectual discipline that it has seldom treated literature, art, and music so as to evoke right emotional response and produce positive enjoyment. Its presentations of science should aim, in part, to arouse a genuine appreciation of nature.

So. Intellectual discipline is not compatible with "right emotional response" and "positive enjoyment." And a pack of manual arts teachers, educationists, and bureaucrats can tell us what a right emotional response would be, presumably. They can clarify for us, without any tedious attention to inorganic chemistry or the laws of motion, not only an appreciation of nature but a *genuine* appreciation of nature. They are bestowers of blessings on the benighted. Their discoveries, however, would probably come as a sad surprise to Jefferson, who, in spite of his command of intellectual disciplines, labored all his life under the delusion that he *did* take "positive enjoyment" from literature, art, and especially from music.

One of the characteristics of the mind of educationism, just as much now as in the days of *Cardinal Principles*, is an apparent inability to follow paths of thought far enough to discover contradictions in logic. If scientific research, or technological craftsmanship, for that matter, were as little given to self-examination as educationistic theory, we would have practically nothing that worked. The notion that intellectual discipline is somehow an impediment to "right response," a notion that we find not only in the context of the arts but everywhere in *Cardinal Principles* and in subsequent educationistic theorizing, must eventually lead us to the conclusion that those who hold it cannot be believed. It is, after all, by virtue of some fancied "intellectual discipline" in themselves that educationistic theorists claim to prescribe the "right" responses, attitudes, and appreciations that are precluded by intellectual discipline.

This is not only illogical but even antisocial, which is another disabling contradiction in a theory proposing schooling as a means of socialization. They say, in effect, that *students* who are needlessly led into intellectual discipline will not achieve right emotional response, but that educationists are *not* thus handicapped. It is a strange sort of teacher who says in his heart

that his students need never know what he knows. That goes far beyond elitism; it is cultism. If a teacher is dedicated to knowledge and thought, he works in the hope that his students, some of them, one of them, will come to know and think more than he does, for only thus can knowledge and thought be served. To treat his students, or some of them, or even one of them, as though they could never know and think what he knows and thinks, suggests a dedication to something else. Perhaps to his job. Perhaps he fears to raise up what such a teacher would surely think of as competition. While an individual teacher, of course, need have no realistic fears that some student will supplant him, the same is not true of the ideologues who claim to define the whole system of teaching and learning. How convenient it is, we notice, for the future welfare of the commissioners that *they* are immune to the nasty side effects of intellectual discipline from which they will magnanimously shelter the children.

I must note, at this point, that the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education was assembled by the National Education Association, a widely misunderstood outfit. The ordinary citizen reads its pronouncements in the newspapers from time to time and notices that it gives its seal of approval to treacly television shows and elementary dramatizations of popular "classics." He has the impression that the NEA is something "official." But it is, of course, as it was in 1918 and long before, a trade union. That it should be called on to set national policy in the public schools is like putting the teamsters' union in charge of traffic laws and the licensing of drivers, but even more so. We have accepted the determinations of a teachers' union as to how America should be educated only because the job of designing an educational system is so hideously boring that only those whose self-interest is clearly at stake will undertake it. Our corporate self-interest, to be sure, is also very much at stake, but not clearly, at least not *clearly* enough for the ordinary citizen, who cannot see beyond the fact that all questions of education and schooling are hideously boring.

The self-interest of a massive educationists' trade union is evident on every page of *Cardinal Principles*. Whether that self-interest influences the document in partnership with shabby habits of thought, or whether those habits are themselves the consequences of the self-interest, who can say? But the result is the same. In every "main objective" we can find generous provision for the employment of growing hosts of dues-paying members of the NEA. It is also assured that much room will be made in the academic world for a new class, the arrivistes of educationism, the guidance counselors and curriculum facilitators, the physical education and typing teachers, the appreciation experts and the right emotional response imparters, the fingernail inspectors, and the right relationships inducers, who can launch themselves easily into secure and respectable careers without worrying about the burdensome demands of mere information and intellectual discipline.

In the world projected in *Cardinal Principles*, there is no place for scholars or scholarship. The whole, vast enterprise of training the minds that will shape the thought and knowledge of the future is dealt with in exactly one sentence: "Provisions should be made also for those having distinctly academic interests and needs." Exactly what provisions the Gang of Twenty-seven might have had in mind, we'll never know, although their provisions for the supervision of habits of hygiene and social events are detailed at length. We have to wonder, too, how such provisions could be made at all, given that "Each subject now taught in high school is in need

of extensive reorganization in order that it may contribute more effectively to the objectives outlined herein, and the place of that subject in secondary education should depend on the value of such contribution." By that principle, any course of study that might attract those wretched misfits with academic interests, an intellectual discipline clogged with mere information, would have to be either diluted into the pursuit of appreciation or simply eliminated. That, of course, has happened.

(All is not lost, however. In any school there are a few teachers who didn't know what they were getting into when they went to the teachers' college and have stoutly--and usually silently--retained their devotion to intellectual discipline and even improved their stores of mere information in spite of having to give most of their time to education courses. They are the unintended "provision . . . for those having distinctly academic interests and needs." That's why every educated person you know will give special credit to this or that certain teacher. Such teachers, however, are seldom popular with their colleagues, and never with the administrators, so they often have to work underground. No matter. Those weird students will find those weird teachers and will learn from them, in any subject at all, something of the work of the mind.)

In fact, the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education was simply not interested in students with "distinctly academic needs and interests." It began by assuming that there were few of those in any case, and ended by projecting an "education" that would make them even fewer. In the Commission's plan there was as little concern for academic talent as there was space on the page for naming the provisions, for the commissioners were, deep down where it really counted, not teachers at all but Sunday-school supervisors *manqués*, officious and ill-informed laymen busily hastening to good make-works and armed with the serene self-confidence that only ignorance can provide. They wanted to be not teachers but preachers, and prophets too, charging themselves with the cure of the soul of democracy and the raising up in the faith of true believers. They made concrete and formal the anti-intellectual dogmatism that characterizes our schools today.

The seventh and last of the Commission's main objectives of secondary education was nothing less than *Ethical Character*, which they pronounced "paramount" in a *democratic* society, as if Plato, Epictetus, Saint Augustine, Voltaire, Kant, Spinoza, and so on, for countless thinkers who lived under all sorts of governments, had somehow missed the point now perfectly clear to certain manual arts teachers and associate superintendents. They were as smugly confident of their ability to engender Ethical Character through "the wise selection of content and methods of instruction in all subjects of study" as they were of their ability to tell right emotional response from wrong. All it takes, after all, is what they are certain they have: wisdom.

I have more to say later on the vexatious question of the role of public education, all too accurately described in *Cardinal Principles* as "the one agency that may be controlled definitely and consciously," in the supposed formation of Ethical Character. For now, it is useful to point to the obvious fact that you will have a hard time finding a citizen who is opposed to the formation of ethical character. Or to worthy use of leisure time. Or to health, or any of the "main objectives" of secondary education as discovered in *Cardinal Principles*. Those objectives

can be seen to constitute what is essentially a political platform eminently acceptable to all those who are in favor of good and against evil. Public acceptance of that platform was all the more certain because there was, after all, no opposing party.

And how could there be? In this case, opposition could hardly be the simple recommendation of contrary "main objectives." No one would vote for some educational splinter group calling for sickness and degeneracy. The opposition, if there were to be any, would require in its adherents a precise and thorough attention to detail, the pursuit of logical argument, the formulation of hypotheses as to consequences, an underlying theory as to the means and ends of education, and some considerable knowledge of the history of human thought. Such a constituency will never be large. There was such a constituency, of course, as there always is, made up of thoughtful and educated people of all kinds, some of them actually in schools. But the scholarly, academic wing of that small party was not asked to the table with the members of the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, who didn't want to hear any more of that "traditional training of the reasoning faculties" stuff in the report of the Eliot committee. And the other political dissidents, the ones you might call the civilians in the school war, had other and far more important things to do. Most of them had probably never heard of *Cardinal Principles*, and those who had would surely have found it of little interest. The theorists of American public education, actually feeble and helpless creatures, have evolved an amazing power to protect themselves against predators by emitting an unbearable cloud of dullness and boredom.

If there is such a thing as an intellectual and cultural elite in America, and there may well be a far larger one than even its detractors imagine, it is surely worthy of condemnation, for it is selfish and lazy. Jefferson and his friends indubitably thought of themselves as an elite, a natural aristocracy of talent. So thinking, they saw themselves not as privileged but as obliged by their gifts, obliged to serve the common good by the simple fact of their ability to do so. This attitude is not rampant among us. It is especially un-rampant in the academic community, where those who more or less secretly *do* think of themselves as an elite have trained themselves to imagine that the dull business of public education has nothing to do with their high endeavors.

The underlying attitudes and beliefs in *Cardinal Principles* have not been mitigated by the passage of time or the pressure of momentous events. Quite to the contrary, they have been regularly reaffirmed and reinvigorated, both in theory and practice. The devisers of the Seven Deadly Principles set out not to teach certain skills and knowledge to hosts of children but to change the nature of American society. They succeeded. They didn't, of course, *make* the vast mass of the people stupid and uninformed, for that happens in the course of nature without any need for deliberate effort, but they did arrange that fewer and fewer would reach escape velocity and rise out of the vast mass of the stupid and uninformed. As the consequences of the deadly principles become evident, sometimes one by one and sometimes in whole hosts of troubles, the descendants of the Gang of Twenty-seven point them out as justifications for even more of the same, more schemes to alter a society already suffering from all the earlier alterations.

The seven "main objectives of education" are still the main objectives of education, although one of them, Command of Fundamental Processes, was always somewhat less main than the others and remains so now that it has been renamed Basic Minimum Competence, in which term the important word is "minimum." And it is exactly toward the achievement of those objectives, especially the greater six, that the training and indoctrination of schoolteachers is directed. Earnest attention to the seventh is just not possible in this scheme, for it would require precisely those things that *Cardinal Principles* finds inimical to "right" and "worthy" values: stringent intellectual discipline and great stores of mere information. The professors of education are not interested in those things, for their own training and indoctrination are no different from what they visit upon their students. After all, what else have they to bestow? And the professors of everything else just don't want to be bothered, and what they *do* have to bestow they save for a few favored students who will in turn become the professors of everything else who just don't want to be bothered. Mencken was right.

The Seven Deadly Principles is republished from Richard Mitchell's book, *The Graves of Academe*, pp. 69-97. Little Brown and Co., 1981. Mr. Mitchell, who wrote as The Underground Grammarian, placed all of his works in the public domain upon his death.